Section III: Lessons Learned

## How are students placed in remedial writing courses?

* The University of Colorado at Denver and at Boulder do not offer remedial writing courses. Instead, the assumption is that any student who meets the requirements for entry into the university is a competent enough writer to be successful in the writing program.
* The community colleges require students to complete the Accuplacer, a standardized test. After examining and taking the test, the inquiry group concluded that students need the following skills and knowledge to be successful:
  + Understand the format of the text, which is computer-based
  + Understand the function of grammar and syntax
  + Manipulate language without context
  + Understand parallelism
  + Know how to punctuate subordinate clauses that introduce a sentence and other comma rules
  + Have a strong vocabulary
  + Revise at the sentence level
  + Analyze sentences to answer the question: Why did the author make this choice?
  + Combine sentences

## What are colleges (and other post-secondary institutions) looking for in terms of writing proficiency?

* Writing that reflects the various disciplines (which includes writing in the workplace)
* Practical writing within and across digital environments
* Evidential reasoning based on diverse sources
* Argumentation: the ability to develop claims, provide support, and develop credible warrants
* Writing for specialized groups for actual problems
* Writing that results from close readings of texts, talk, graphics, web data, etc.
* Working with audiences, including clients in the world outside of academia
* Ability to analyze and synthesize ideas from various texts/sources, including non-fiction. (Note: students must read dense texts, including books, corpuses, and data sets.)
* Appropriate voice (active rather than passive except for some scientific writing; appropriate for audience and purpose; the appropriate level of formality for the purpose and audience)
* The processes for writing so that students develop the skills for writing that are transferable to multiple contexts
* Understand that writing (and reading) are powerful inquiry tools
* Rhetorical knowledge, which includes:
  + Focus on a purpose
  + Respond to the needs of different audiences
  + Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
  + Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
  + Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
  + Understand how genres shape reading and writing

## Isn’t good writing, good writing? If students master the basics of writing, won’t they be successful in college?

* “Good writing is a complex concept that varies by discipline.” (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, Kreth)
* One of the many challenges of writing instruction is how to teach for transfer.

## What are common grading/assessment practices at the post secondary level?

* Rubrics
* Grading on content, grammar, and transitions
  + Example of one grading formula: about 10% of the grade is based on grammar and transtions; critical thinking is the rest of the grade;
  + “If you say interesting things poorly, your grade suffers by 10%. Another 10% is citation.” (Note: this instructor doesn’t care what style students use as long as

## What are students primarily writing in their senior year of high school?

* Five paragraph essays
* Literary analysis
* Some creative pieces (narrative, memoir)
* Research papers

(Note: as the group searched for student writing that was not the five paragraph essay nor the literacy analysis, they had a difficult time finding proficient papers in other genres. One worry is that seniors are not writing nearly enough to become proficient as they need to be for success in college.)

## What are students primarily writing in college?

* In-class essays, critical analyses research-based writing, personal essays, lab reports, and literary interpretations. (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, Kreth)
* Most writing is based on reading some kind of text.
* Fact-based opinion papers (John Ackerman)
* Technical writing
* Annotated bibliography
* Writing that addresses an authentic audience (i.e., grant proposals; service learning projects; papers for the Conference of World Affairs, such as blogs and press releases)
* Literature reviews

## What dispositions do college professors value?

* A learning stance: students continue growing as writers throughout college (and life). “Students who see themselves as novices are most capable of developing new skills; students who … write about something that matters to them, are best able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout their undergraduate careers.” (Sommers and Salz)
* A stance of curiosity and inquiry as a way to generate, develop, and explore ideas
* An inquiry stance: students who slowly come to a thesis because they are authentically curious about an idea and are want to explore it before they land on their thesis.
* Valuing the importance of endurance and stamina especially as students write in depth pieces
* Students who read voraciously and widely.
* Understanding writing processes, including what works for them as individuals and recognizing the importance of multiple drafts
* Knowing how to analyze and synthesize
* Supporting arguments with evidence from multiple texts
* Writing in a variety of genre and to multiple authentic audiences
* Understanding craft of writing so that students move beyond grammar as a technical tool but as a crafting tool
* Understanding that learning to write well is a life-long journey
* Willingness to seek and take feedback and use it for growth,
* Let go of the idea that the first draft needs to be perfect
* Knowing how to move beyond themselves in analysis
* Shifting from seeing information in isolated facts versus interconnecte
* A dynamic vs. fixed mindset (see Carol Dweck’s *Mindset*)
* Understanding and valuing the craft of writing rather than perseverating on correct of incorrect language/grammar
* Knowing how to debunk the myth of the boring topic by adjusting their approach to the topic

## What writing skills lend themselves to success in college?

* Evidential reasoning
* Argumentation
* Writing for specialized groups for actual problems
* Close reading: texts, talk, graphics, web data
* Condensing dense work, i.e. books, corpuses, data sets
* Audience awareness
* Writing extended text (“some 40% of twelfth-grade students…report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper o three pages or more.” Applebee and Langer as quoted in Addison and McGee)
* Writing in multiple genres, including literary journalism and the literature review

## What kind of grammar knowledge they should come with?

* Subject/verb agreement
* Active voice (Quote from a university or community college panelist: “In sciences they are moving away from passive voice.”)
* Punctuation
* Dangling modifiers
* Run ons
* “Get ‘to be’ out of papers.”

## What surprised us?

* The use of first person is not fixed. Some professors prefer first person while others don’t. Most seem to agree that opinion papers are best written in first person. Professors of the humanities tend to value first person perspectives while non-humanities professors tend to value third person perspective (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, Kreth). Other comments about first person from the panel of university/community college writing instructors include:
  + “Some of the weaker papers will use many I’s. The ‘I’ can be an easy way to write.”
  + “You can use ‘I’ as long as you don’t say, ‘In my opinion…’”
  + “I is fine; you is not. Period.”
* Writing now includes digital work.
* Professors understand that writing competency is a developmental process – that we can grow writers.
* The essay is under debate: “…we suggest taking a close look at whether or not ‘the essay’ as a genre is still a useful or viable genre upon which to base writing curricula at all levels. If the essay is no longer a viable genre, or even if it is, we need to do more to encourage instruction in genres that embrace both deep learning promoted when writing is an integral part of any course as well as exhibit the multimodal skills now required across the curriculum and into the workplace. One possibility among many is literary journalism that is rooted in artfully crafted narrative and critical research-based writing” (from Addison and McGee) However, some of the university and community college professors argued that students needed a basic understanding of the structure of the essay. Clearly, they saw the essay as a viable genre.
* There is debate about the thesis statement. Some professors value the thesis while others worry that the thesis becomes a “pair of cement boots.”

## What are suggestions for high school teachers?

* Expand the notion of genre
* Expand the writing that happens in English classes (Note: only 1% of college students major in English, so teaching students how to write the literary analysis has limited power.)
* Teach for transfer: What are those skills and dispositions that are transferable to multiple writing situations? What do students need to know to write successfully in the work place? In college?
* Use mentor texts. (Mentor texts can be found on federal government websites.)
* Use reading and writing for inquiry.